



National
Foreign
Assessment
Center

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425-257

16-294

(166)

Latin America Review

7 December 1978

APPROVED FOR
RELEASE DATE:
04-Apr-2011

~~Secret~~

RP LAR 78-015
7 December 1978

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Argentina-Chile: Plans for Military Action

[redacted] Argentina's armed forces plan to initiate a military confrontation in mid-December if Chile does not make a substantial territorial concession in the Beagle Channel area at the Foreign Ministers' meeting scheduled for 12 December. Argentine President Videla, who has been making efforts to reach a peaceful settlement, could lose control of the situation if the Foreign Ministers' meeting breaks down. [redacted]

The Argentine high command reportedly has ordered all operational units of the armed forces to be fully deployed and ready for combat by 15 December. The US defense attache in Buenos Aires reports that all warships in Puerto Belgrano--the main Argentine naval base--are already in a 24-hour readiness posture and that their hull numbers have been painted out--generally regarded as an indicator of preparation for battle. [redacted]

[redacted]

Both Argentina and Chile are continuing to purchase more arms and materiel. Since late 1977, Argentina has contracted for an estimated \$550 million to \$750 million worth of military equipment and ammunition. During the same period, Chile has probably spent about \$25 million. The difference suggests that Chile still does not believe it will have to engage in a protracted conflict. For

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its part, Argentina is not only preparing for any contingency in the current dispute, but also apparently intends to upgrade its military inventory for more general defense purposes. [redacted]

Although Argentina and Chile have agreed to the Foreign Ministers' meeting, they still differ on the purpose of the talks. Argentina apparently intends to press for continued substantive bilateral discussions as a prerequisite to third party mediation. Chile has agreed only "to review the diplomatic record" and wants immediate mediation. These differences over how to proceed could cause the talks to break down before a mediator can be selected. [redacted]

Both nations seem to attach more importance to their jurisdictional claims than they do to a peaceful settlement. Fundamentally, Argentina wants Chile's oceanic control limited to the Pacific, with no "minor" intrusions into the South Atlantic that might later be expanded. To defend its unencumbered control in the South Atlantic, Argentina insists on ownership of a specific landmark as a boundary point. Chile, on the other hand, refuses to give up its proprietary rights to islets located in the South Atlantic--which are not part of the juridical dispute--and insists that mediation be limited to fixing a maritime boundary determined by meridians instead of territory. [redacted]

Videla's failure to obtain any significant concessions from the Chileans has further weakened his position, especially with several influential military commanders who seem increasingly disposed to force a resolution of the channel issue through armed confrontation. Videla's government in recent months has been ineffective in handling a broad range of policy matters, [redacted]

[redacted] If hostilities ensue, Videla's apparent inability to take command could result in his being pushed aside by more aggressive military leaders. [redacted]

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